

The Best Story I Ever Wrote, Annotated.*

by Lily Tiarks

*And Also Partially Illustrated.**

** Poorly.

A Rude Awakening

1

I have so many questions. For example, "why?" That's a nice one. Short, neat, concise. I guess, more specifically, the question is "why me?" Why—*why*—does the phone have to ring at the *crack of dawn*—or, 10:23 am, the irritatingly bright desk clock informs me—*on a Sunday*? I reluctantly remember that it must be Monday, but I push the thought out of my head. And if, indeed, it does have to ring at this hour, why is the noise so insistent on crashing into my skull and leaving me with a reverberating headache? These are all good, important questions. But I would have to say that the most pressing question is who—*who*—on earth would be calling me not on my cell phone, but on the wall phone? As in, the one that hangs in the kitchen and is attached to the wall. By a cord. The one that surely hasn't been used since 1999.

10:23

I wrote this description before I'd ever had a hangover, and I think I actually guessed pretty well

This whole part of the story was inspired by my ill-fated attempt to fix our West Village F apartment wall phone. Only worked once

As my curiosity takes hold of me, I stumble-trip-dance-walk into the kitchen to answer it, the frigid floor tiles punishing the soles of my feet. I lift the heavy receiver to my ear, inexplicably shoving it between my head and shoulder like I remember my mom doing when I was a kid, even though both my hands are free.

I still find myself doing this sometimes. It's like skeuomorphic behavior.

"Hello?" Is it possible to sound like you're asleep? Probably. If it is, then I do. The voice on the other end is grumpy and staticky.

"Yeah, Apartment 812? Campbell/Brüssinger?"

Named in honor of my friend Alea

"Yeah, that's us. This is Sylvia Campbell."

"Ok, hi, this is Norman from the lobby. Uh, so, you gotta come down here. There's this guy at my desk. He's been calling you and bothering me for like ten minutes, and says you aren't responding."

Named purely for the "Norman the Doorman" joke

I had forgotten entirely about this joke.

Curly

"It's not the police, is it? If it's the police, tell them we didn't start the fire. Well, we did ignite it, but we tried to fight it."

"Oh, ha, very funny." I feel like that was a noble attempt at a joke, considering my weakened state, but Norman is having none of it. "It's not the police. Just some guy. Curly hair. Annoying. I'm sitting here doing the crossword and he leans over and corrects me on 56-Down. I mean, it's starting to look like he was right, but still. Get down here."

"Yeah, ok, be right down." Clunkily, clumsily, I hang the phone back onto the wall, where I suspect it shall Never Ring Again. I dig the heels of my hands into my eyes, and then survey the kitchen. Light bounces in from the window, reflecting off of every single white or metallic surface, making my head throb and pulse and threaten to go on strike. The kitchen counter is cluttered with mugs containing crispy old tea bags, and the sticky floor has accumulated an impressive layer of crumbs and fruit stickers. The trash smells like it might contain someone's limb. My recent wallowing strategy hasn't done much for my housekeeping abilities. I return to my bedroom, purposefully avoiding looking at the whiteboard calendar on the refrigerator. I don't need to think about what day today is.



I have never liked this line.

I can sense Norman growing impatient, and decide to get a move on. I stuff my feet into a pair of crusty slippers and briefly examine myself in the mirror before conceding that the hair situation is well and truly hopeless, so I'd best not bother. I pick up my cell phone and shuffle out into the hall. About four steps out of my door, curiosity finally breaks through the sleepy, headachy fog in my head.

A lot of parts of Sylvia are based on me, but this is taken directly from my morning routine.

Questions, more questions. Well, really just the one: Who? Who would show up like this without warning? Norman's description sounded kind of like my little brother, but surely he's in

school. And, I calculate the odds of Mom allowing fifteen-year-old Nate to travel 400 miles by himself to be, well, not good, especially since she considers twenty-three-year-old me to be "irresponsible." Maybe someone was here to murder me. Maybe I'd be taken hostage, and Norman would be gagged and tied to his desk chair. Maybe I'd be carried off in a burlap sack.

Always has been my favorite line

My headache pointed out that it would probably be darker in there, so I should at least consider it. I jog the last few yards to the elevator, my grimy bangs flapping in that way that only works if you're Pocahontas, and I most certainly am not.

Disney princesses as a group are responsible for many unrealistic expectations about hair.

As I step into the elevator, I unlock my cell phone, forcing my eyes around the date/time portion of the home screen, and check the seven new messages that I have accrued in the past 14 minutes.

GOOD NEWS FOR YOU, SYLVIE

Oh, I do not have the energy for this. No, sir.

I AM IN YOUR LOBBY. LET JOY BE UNCONFINED

Why does he text in all caps? Does he think I'll hear him better, somehow?

WAKE UP, LITTLE SUSIE. RISE AND SHINE

The Everly Brothers. I should have known it was him.

I THINK YOUR DOORMAN IS IN LOVE WITH ME

And then, about 20 seconds later,

SADLY I DO NOT THINK IT WILL WORK OUT BETWEEN US, AS HE ENTERED

THE CAPITAL OF NORWAY AS "OTTO" IN THE CROSSWORD. BUT FEAR NOT. I

SHALL NOT CORRECT HIM. I WILL RESTRAIN MYSELF

That'll be the day. I don't believe he has ever restrained himself from correcting someone.

RT@myself

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Some thing about shared references seems to really imply that you've known someone a long time

THIS IS THE HARDEST THING I'VE EVER DONE. "OTTO" IS NOT EVEN A CITY, LIKE, ANYWHERE. COME DOWN SOON PLEASE AND THANK YOU

And, finally,

NEW BOYFRIEND NORMAN IS CALLING YOUR APARTMENT, SLEEPING BEAUTY <3

Stole this line from my grandmother - thanks, MaMa

By the time I finish reading, the Ancient and Honorable Elevator has reached the lobby.

I remember basing aspects of Ollie on my friend Isaac, but I apparently also stole his appearance.

As the doors pull apart, I peer through the gap, looking for him, trying to make sure I haven't lost my marbles entirely. And there he is, sitting on the edge of Norman's desk, wearing seasonally inappropriate cargo shorts and boat shoes, hair poofing out from his head in a curly cloud of chaos, face all angles and smiles.

Also true of my friend Isaac. If I ever publish this story, I should probably give him some royalties.

We met on the first day of seventh grade. Oliver Harcup, twelve years old, bounded up to me outside homeroom to inform me that not only were my shoelaces untied, but also that my shoes were "a disgrace," and my purple hair was "not doing any of us any favors." I considered this and then wordlessly flipped him off, which both shocked and delighted him.

I think this should be "bounded"

Only friend-making method until age 17

In retrospect, "became friends" seems like an appropriate phrase, because I don't recall having much of a choice in the matter. I suppose part of it was mere administrative fate—always the same classes, so many years in a row. I think it had more to do with our complementary skills. I baked, he consumed. I ripped pants, he patched them. He talked, I listened. And, we were the closest thing to actual gay people the school had, so we got grouped together. Like a club. A GSA with two members. We were in a closet with a glass door—we never came out, but everyone could see us in there anyway. Everyone, apparently, except Carlene Yeats, who once

I spent a long, long time on these lines, trying to make sure that they weren't conforming to gender stereotypes

I've thought about it a lot and I still have no idea what I mean by the line

asked me, eyes wide, if Ollie and I were a couple. I remember staring at her, trying to think of a way to say "not in a million years" without sounding derisive. I failed.

I think I should have extended the horse analogy longer.

"SYLVIE!" My headache reared up and started stomping around the corral.

"Inside voice, Ollie." He sprang up from the desk and lifted me airborne, briefly. "No.

Down. Right now." *Based on my friend Mark, who has never learned how to hug someone without lifting them up entirely.*

"Say thank you to Norman, Sylvie."

"I'm sorry, Norman." Norman waved me off with a winking hand wave, like, 'have fun, kids.' As soon as we were safely enclosed in the elevator, Ollie leaned in conspiratorially.

["When are you going to tell your doorman you're a lesbian?"]

"Well, Ollie, the moment when you tell your doorman you're a lesbian is a very personal, beautiful time in a young woman's life. It's a private affair. But, you know. Probably never."

"How will you ever establish a relationship of trust with Norman if you refuse to be emotionally vulnerable with him?"

"Let's go ahead and file that away under Questions I Never Thought I'd Be Asked."

"Roger that."

"When are you going to tell your parents, and I quote, that you're a raging homosexual, emphasis on the raging?"

"Touché."] We exit the elevator and walk down the hall, my slippers blending in nicely with the mottled brown carpet. I look at him sidelong. Hadn't shaved. He must have skipped it

I think I was going for "witty banter" here, but it reads more like "exhausting".



this morning. Not typical of Ollie, who normally can't stand the scratchy feeling of stubble on his face. I absentmindedly turn the key, my stomach hardening. I mean, I know why he's here. Don't I? I'm going to have to talk about it, aren't I? Don't rush it, Sylvia, I tell myself. Can't have this conversation in the hall anyway.

"A charming abode! Huge improvement over that last place. You know, with the guy with the duck? Um, no, thank you. I'm pretty sure living with ducks is how people get diseases. AND, while we're on the subject of ducks and diseases, do you know what Eric told me about Kacie Gallagher?" He continues, but I stop listening, lost in thought.

Not the best transition ever written

Since we met, eleven years ago, a lot has changed about Ollie. He's at least a foot taller, and he can grow a beard now (although he doesn't). Over the summer between eighth and ninth grade, when he spent two months at his grandmother's house in Michigan, his voice dropped almost an entire octave. But some things haven't changed at all. Namely, that he gossips more than anyone I know.

Also taken from Isaac. Dear Isaac sorry.

I have never been to Michigan, but it seems like somewhere a grandmother might live

I remember when Ollie told me in September of our senior year of high school, voice fake lowered, that Denise had told him that Derek had told her that Maria had told him—and you have to understand that this is all in *confidence*, Sylvie Darling—that Viola Mariani, fellow high school senior, science fair prodigy extraordinaire, first oboe in band, someone I had never really given a lot of thought to, had a crush on me. I remember staring at him, my mind completely frozen with shock. "You know, Sylvie. IN A GAY WAY."

NAME GAME (in order)
• Mother of childhood friend
• Disney channel mid-2000s show
"Life with Derek"
• The Sound of Music
• Shakespeare(??)

I never expected to date anyone in high school. Being the Bible-Belt quasi-closeted high school lesbian that I was, I figured it'd all just wait until I went to college, preferably somewhere

Far Far Away. And, besides, I'd sort of convinced myself that I was the only gay girl at the

Based on Shrek. #GetShrek'd

I remember thinking back to my conversations with friends from conservative areas when writing this part, because I really have no idea what that's like. I still don't think I got it entirely right.

This is a theme that, I'm now realizing, you're probably only familiar with if you have seen The Tigger Movie, a modern cinematic masterpiece (ok, it's terrible) school. Last of my kind. Like Tigger in the Hundred Acre Woods. Even though I knew, statistically, that it was nearly impossible.

But there I was, clueless seventeen-year-old, with a top-secret girlfriend. I was in way over my head. She was brash and loud, an explosion of obscure pop culture references and wavy black hair. I was infatuated, I was consumed. She was so confident. She knew exactly what she wanted, which pierced my leathery hide of teenage insecurity and made me hope that maybe she knew exactly what I wanted too. I loved her without ever thinking about it very much. Even more than I loved her, I loved that she loved me. It didn't last. Well, not really. It was icy in January and rocky in February and over in March, culminating in a series of shouting matches in my car that stretched into April. And then, one morning in May...

I would pay money to see a movie by that title. I'm imagining a James Bond thing, but with teenage lesbians.

No, Sylvia. Don't go there. Not yet.

I realize, as I make a mental U-turn and pull out of Memory Lane, that Ollie has lost interest in gossiping with someone who is staring blankly out the kitchen window instead of listening to him. He tilts his head, gives me a sad half-smile, and starts to whistle "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning," loudly and in several different keys.

I think this is one song that is guaranteed to make a beautiful morning terrible, and a terrible morning worse.

"Shh, Ollie, knock it off. I think Rachel's probably asleep."

"The new roommate? It's Monday morning."

"She's a bartender. They work nights." I press my ear against Rachel's bedroom door, but can hear no identifying sounds one way or the other. When I turn back around, I see that Ollie has collapsed onto the kitchen floor, knees bent, back against the oven. I seat myself across from him, leaning up against the cupboards. In the narrow passage of the kitchen, my pajama-

I think the word I was looking for is "incriminating"

clad shins silently knock his bare ones. Silence settles in as he pulls down a dishcloth and attempts origami.

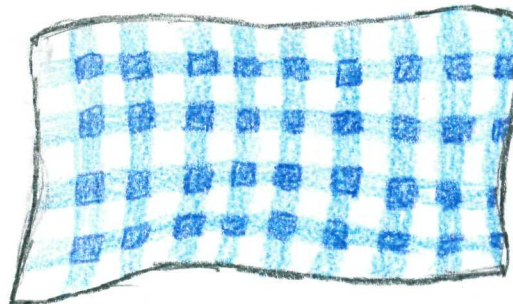
Can you even do this with a dishcloth? I wonder.

Based on my roommate, who only ever uses my full name when we're about to have A Discussion

“Oliver.”

“Sylvia.”

“What are you doing?”



“Good question. It was supposed to be a swan, but I think it looks more like a rock.”

“No, like, here. My apartment. What are you doing here? It’s Monday morning. You live, like, three hours away. You didn’t warn me at all. You look like you haven’t shaved since yesterday, which I suspect is a personal record.”

“As usual, accurate on every count.” His eyes stay fixed on the gingham terrycloth dishcloth swan rock. *Borrowed from Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*

“Ollie.” Finally, he looks up. His energy has evaporated. His smile looks painful, a wedge carved out of his stubbly tan face. I study his eyes, but they aren’t full of pain, or fear.

They look worried.

I’ve never been able to read anyone’s eyes. I just get caught up and distracted with which eye I’m supposed to be looking into.

“Sylvie, I remember. Don’t do this. Don’t bother. You can tell me you don’t remember what today is or don’t care, but I’m still the only one who’s absolutely sure that you’d be lying.” He brings up an excellent point. I don’t know why I’m bothering hiding any of it from him.

“So you came because you’re worried about me.” How did that not sound accusatory? I meant it to sound accusatory.

His voice is measured and calm. "Yeah, well, I was worried you might be wallowing, and not cleaning or, like, taking care of yourself, and I thought you might have been drinking..." he trails off and smirks, eyes fixed on a row of empty bottles on my counter. "But clearly I'm, you know, way off base."

I have always liked this description, but I've never known if this is the right place to put it.

I stare fixedly at the cabinet. There's a traffic jam in my throat, and I can't quite get the swallow down. My angry tracheal crossing guard is currently re-routing all displays of emotion through my eyes, which are somehow both fiery hot and swimming in liquid. I start talking without having any idea where I'm going with it. I just feel like I should defend myself somehow.

I call this the Indiana Jones rule of writing YA fiction. You can only swear once, so make sure you use it well.

"I don't need—"



Yes you do. What day is it? I know you know. I know you know, Sylvie.

Look at your phone. Tell me what day it is."

Some say the world will end in fire/
Others in ice. / From what I've tasted of desire, / I hold with those who favor fire. / But if I had to perish twice, / I think that for destruction ice / is also great, and would suffice.

"May 18th."



I remember finding out. I was reading the paper. The headline cut into my brain like it was made of fire. Or ice. Or both. "Head-On Collision on I-94 Kills One, Injures Two." May 18th, my senior year of high school, five years ago today. There was a drunk driver going the wrong way on the highway. He hit a high school senior driving her mom's minivan back from a party late at night. I kept reading, my insides turning to stone. The high school student was identified as Viola Mariani, age 18. Such a shame, such a shame, said my parents. My dad asked if I knew her well. Mom shushed him, saying it was a shame either way, Dave. Nate, only ten years old, still a kid, looked at me and somehow knew my world was collapsing, and distracted

Every friend who I lost in high school, I lost in this type of accident. This was supposed to be an amalgamation of those events. But drunk driving car accidents are so common where I grew up that, in the 2 years since this was written, another friend was killed by a drunk driver going the wrong way on the highway. This is painfully accurate.

them on my behalf while I scuttled away from the breakfast table, abandoning my Cheerios to permanent sogginess.

This happens so quickly, especially with the non-Honey Nut kind

Questions, so many questions. Could my parents tell I was a mess? Yes, almost certainly.

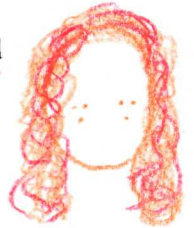
Was I going to have to tell them why? Does mascara come out of pillowcases if you wash them normally? I was still allowed to be sad, right? I mean, I loved her. Maybe not right up to the moment she passed, but I had loved her. I could just tell my parents that she was my friend, that was why I was upset. But weren't people at school going to wonder why I was so upset about the death of someone I didn't (or, rather, wasn't supposed to) know all that well?

One of the most sad sentiments is feeling like you aren't allowed to feel some way, I think

Ultimately, the last question didn't matter much anyway. We graduated not long after that, and I was left with a summer full of endless ache and sticky humid tears. Ollie would put my head on his lap and recite the story of the Princess Bride until I fell asleep. He was the only one who knew everything. Classic Ollie. He always knows everything about everyone. There was a service I wasn't invited to, and a grave I've still never seen. The summer stretched on. And then it was September and I went away and did my very best to abandon my emotional baggage on the side of the highway.

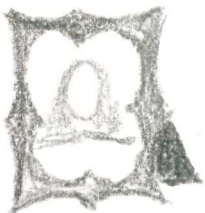


And in many ways, I did. I went to college, far, far away. I left semi-closeted Sylvia back in the Bible Belt. I moved on. I made friends. I fell in love with Danni, a gentle, lanky, freckled redhead. When I told her about Vi, all I said was that it didn't end well, which was true by all accounts. I was safe there, in my own little bubble. But when I left college, I fell deep into a funk. I missed my friends terribly. Danni and I split up. I cried over things I hadn't thought about in years. I looked at pictures of my grandmother, who died when I was ten, and wept anew. I cried over the deaths of various characters on various TV shows. And I dreaded May 18th,



Based on my friend Sara

In retrospect, Danni was based partially on Ron Weasley



knowing it would force me deeper into my own emotional pit, and make me reckon with those things I'd been shoving down for days and weeks and months and years.

I wish I had expanded here a little

I force my eyes up from the floor, and look at Ollie's face. I try to say something, but my voice catches, and the tears are coming out at a truly alarming rate. Ollie scoots forwards, putting my head against his shoulder, and I breathe in his familiar, comforting, mostly-deodorant smell. I stay there until my core muscles start to hurt, and then I lean back against the cupboard, grab the Swan Rock dishtowel origami off the floor, and bury my face in it. The terrycloth is pleasantly absorbent, soaking up my tears admirably. I debate blowing my nose in it, but ultimately decide that crosses some kind of hygiene line that I'd rather stay on the other side of. Ollie tosses me a travel pack of tissues from his pocket. I cry myself out, until the tightness has gone from my chest and the tracheal crossing guard has retired.

"When did you decide to come?" My voice doesn't sound normal, not exactly, but it's getting closer. Ollie sighs.

"Last night. Took the day off of work—I assume you did, too—and took the bus up. Left at, like, six this morning."

"So that's why you haven't shaved."

"Aye, Madam, and it itches like a—"

"—You can borrow my razor, if you want."

"I shall take you up on that later."

"Why didn't you warn me you were coming?"

Oddly enough, this story began as a science fiction story about a one-way teleportation service. Especially in these last few pages, it's hard to remember how it ever could have been that.

PLANET X



S/O to my mom, who has carried one of these around every day since the beginning of time

Oh, people who say shall. You annoy me but also I am you-

"You were in denial, Sylvie. It was so clear. I could hear it in your voice. I could read it in your texts. And so I figured you'd tell me not to come. Or that you'd be drunk."

I must have re-written this four times, and I still don't like it

"Fair enough. But why this time? You never came to see me when we were in college."

"Well, we were farther away then. And plus you were dating Danni. And I didn't know how much of the story you'd told her."

"Not a lot. Well, actually, none."

"That's kind of what I guessed. Probably a good thing, then."

"But since we broke up—"

"—Yeah, since then I figured you'd be even more of a complete mess. And I was right."

I throw Swan Rock at him. It hits him in the face, and stays perched on his shoulder like an awkward gingham ghost. He grabs it and folds it into quarters, eyeliner smudges and all.

"Listen, go back to bed. I'll wake you up around noon, and then maybe you'll feel a little better."

"What are you gonna do until then?"

"I'm gonna re-feng-shui your living room."

"Not a verb."

Taken from my friend Logan, who changed the layout of his bedroom basically every week to better accommodate various energies

"Don't care." He is, apparently, serious about this plan, and he pushes himself off the

floor and begins unplugging all our lamps. I walk past him, back into my dark cool bedroom, and climb into bed. As I go to plug my phone in on the nightstand, it buzzes.

Taken from my other grandmother, who decorated my house. Her record is currently five lamps in a single room, but I think we can get to six

This is one of my favorite songs, so this line always makes me smile.
But I think there shouldn't be commas in it.

13

GOODNIGHT, IRENE, GOODNIGHT, IRENE, I'LL SEE YOU IN MY DREAMS

No, that would only make sense—



WAIT NO THAT WOULD ONLY MAKE SENSE IF I WERE THE ONE GOING TO

SLEEP. NVM

I always liked this interaction. I know "finishing each other's sentences" is a cliché, but it's a cliché because I smile. It buzzes one more time. it's true.

ALSO NO OFFENSE BUT I TRY TO SEE PEOPLE HOTTER AND MORE MALE
THAN YOU IN MY DREAMS. OR I DREAM OF MY FUTURE WITH NORMAN. EITHER
WAY, YOU'RE NOT THERE

A rude goodnight. Seems only fitting, a nice pair for a rude awakening. And by "night," I mean, apparently, 11:12 am.

I think this ending is... fine. I never really knew why I didn't like it, but as I'm thinking about it now, I think it's because I wish I had written more. But it's already pretty long, and I ran out of plot (that is, what little of it I had). I guess I was constrained by the norms of the medium.